

The background of the book cover is a faded, high-angle photograph of the Eiffel Tower and the surrounding Parisian skyline. The image is overlaid with a color gradient that transitions from a deep blue on the left to a bright orange on the right.

Nicolae Sfetcu

**ANTHOLOGY OF THE BEST
FRENCH SHORT STORIES**

First edition

Translator: Nicolae Sfetcu

MultiMedia Publishing

Anthology of the Best French Short Stories

French classical authors

First Edition

Editor: Nicolae Sfetcu

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BOOK PREVIEW

Plato's Dream, by Voltaire (1694-1778)

Plato dreamed a lot, like many others since then. He had thought that human nature was once double, and that in punishment of his faults it was divided into male and female.

He proved that there can be only five perfect worlds, because there are only five regular bodies in mathematics. His republic was one of his great dreams. He had dreamed also that sleeping born the wake, and the wake the sleeping, and that one would surely lose his sight by looking at an eclipse elsewhere than in a basin of water. The dreams then gave a great reputation.

Here it is one of his dreams, which is not one of the least interesting. It seemed to him that the great Demiourgos, the eternal Geometer, having populated the infinite space with countless globes, wished to experience the knowledge of the genii who had witnessed his works. He gave each of them a small piece of matter to arrange, much as Phidias and Zeuxis would have given statues and pictures to their disciples, if it is permissible to compare little things to great ones.

Demogorgon had in common the piece of mud that he called *the earth*; and, having arranged it in the manner we see it today, he pretended to have made a masterpiece. He thought he had subjugated the envy, and awaited for praise, even from his colleagues; he was much surprised to receive from them boos.

One of them, who was a very unpleasant jester, said to him: "You have really done very well; you have separated your world in two, and you have placed a large space of water between the two hemispheres, so there is no communication from one to the other. We will freeze under your two poles, we will die of warm under your equinoctial line. You have carefully established great deserts of sand, so that the passers-by die of hunger and thirst. I am quite content with your sheep, your cows, and your hens; but, frankly, I am not too much content of your snakes and

spiders. Your onions and artichokes are very good things, but I do not see what was your idea by covering the earth with so many venomous plants, unless you have had the intention of poisoning its inhabitants. It seems to me, also, that you have formed some thirty species of monkeys, many more species of dogs, and only four or five species of men: it is true that you gave to this last animal what you call *reason*; but, in conscience, this reason is too ridiculous, and too close to madness. It seems to me, moreover, that you do not take great account of this animal with two feet, since you have given him so many enemies and so little defense, so many diseases and so few remedies, so many passions and so little of wisdom. You do not apparently want to leave many of these animals on earth; for, not counting the dangers to which you expose them, you have so well accounted that one day the small-pox will carry off regularly the tenth part of this species, and that the sister of this small-pox will poison the source of life in the nine remaining parts; and, as if it were not yet enough, you have so arranged things that half the survivors will be busy pleading, and the other to kill themselves; they will undoubtedly have much obligation to you, and you have made there a fine masterpiece."

Demogorgon blushed; he felt clearly that there was moral evil and physical evil in his affair; but he claimed that there was more good than evil. "It is easy to criticize," he said, "but do you think it is so easy to make an animal that is always reasonable; who is free, and who never abuses his liberty? Do you think that, when there are nine or ten thousand plants to be made to feed, one can so easily prevent that some of these plants have injurious qualities? Do you imagine that with a certain quantity of water, sand, mud, and fire, one can have neither sea nor desert? Try, you the laughing gentlemen, to arrange the planet of Mars; we shall see how you have managed it with your two great bands, and what a fine effect your moonless nights have made; we shall see whether there is any folly or disease in your people."

In fact, the genii examined Mars, and they fell rudely upon the mocker. The serious genius who had kneaded Saturn was not spared; his colleagues, the makers of Jupiter, Mercury, and Venus, each had reproaches to wipe.

Large volumes and pamphlets were written; they said good words, they made songs, they ridiculed themselves, the parties became embittered; at last the eternal Demiourgos imposed silence on all of them: "You have done good and bad," he said, "because you have much intelligence and you are imperfect; Your works will last only a few hundred million years; After which, being better educated, you will do better: It is only for me to do perfect and immortal things."

This is what Plato taught his disciples. When he had stopped speaking, one of them said to him: "*And then you woke up.*"

The Ghosts, by Marcel Schwob (1867 - 1905)

Vobis rem horribilem narrabo... mihi pili inhorruerunt.

(T. P. ARBITRI, *Satirae*.)

We were lying on our beds, around the sumptuously served breakfast. The silver lamps burned low; the door had closed behind the juggler, who had tired us with his scientist pigs; and there was in the room an odor of scorched skin, due to the circles of fire by which he blew his grumbling beasts. We brought the dessert: hot honey cakes, candied sea urchins, eggs chaperoned in dough fritters, thrushes in the sauce, stuffed with flour flowers, raisins and nuts. A Syrian slave sang in a sour manner, while the dishes were passed. Our host wiped the long hair of his cute, stretched out by his fingers, lying down close to him, gracefully pricking his teeth with a golden spatula; he was moved by many cups of cooked wine, which he drank eagerly, without mixing it, and he thus began with some confusion:

"Nothing saddens me more than the end of a meal. I am obliged to separate from you, my dear friends. It reminds me the invincibly of the hour when I have to leave you for good. Oh! Oh! How little is the man! A dwarf, at most. Work hard, sweat, blow, campaign in Gaul, Germany, Syria, Palestine, collect your money piece by piece, serve good masters, go from the kitchen to the table, from the table to the favor; have long hair like these, where I wipe my fingers; make you free; keep house in your turn, with customers as I have; speculate on the land and the trade transports, shake yourselves, get up: from the moment when the freed cap has touched your head, you will feel enslaved to a more powerful mistress, so no amount of sesterces will free you. Let us live, while we are well. Child, Falernian verse."

He sent for an articulated silver skeleton, laid him in various positions on the table, sighed, wiped his eyes, and resumed:

"Death is a terrible thing, his thought besieges me especially when I have eaten. The doctors I consulted cannot give me any advice. I think my digestion is bad. There are days when my belly roars like a bull. These disadvantages must be avoided. Do not be embarrassed, my friends, if you are inconvenienced. Anathymiasis can rise to the brain, and we are lost. The Emperor Claudius was in the habit of doing so, and no one laughed. Better to be uncivil than to risk his life."

He thought a few more moments; then he said:

"I cannot get used to my idea. When I think of death, I have before my eyes all the persons I have seen dying. And if we were sure of our body, after all is over! But as we are poor, and miserable, there are mysterious powers that watch out for us, I swear to you by my genius. It can be seen in the crossroads. They have the form of old women, and at night they are made in the manner of birds. One day, when I still dwelt on the Narrow street, my soul rose to my nose with terror; there was one which lit a fire of reeds in a niche of the wall; she poured wine into a bowl of copper, with leeks and parsley; she threw open nuts and examined them. Angry Gods! What

looks she darted! Afterwards, she took beans in her bag and peeled them with her teeth as quickly as a chickadee pricks hemp; and she spat the envelopes around her like corpses of flies.

"It was a *striga*, I have no doubt; and if she had seen me, she might have paralyzed me with her evil eye. There are people who come out at night, who feel breathing; they draw their sword, make the reel, fight against shadows. In the morning they are covered with bruises and the tongue hangs at the corner of their mouths. They met the ghosts. I saw strong men like oxen and even werewolves that they harmed.

"These things are true, I tell you. Besides, they are recognized facts. I would not speak of it, and I might doubt it if I had not had an adventure which caused me to raise all my hair.

"When is watching the dead, one can hear the ghosts: their songs carry you away and you obeys to them in spite of yourself. Their voice is pleading and plaintive, fluttering like that of a bird, tender as the groans of a little child who calls: nothing can resist to it. When I was serving my master, the banker of the Sacred Way, he had the misfortune to lose his wife. I was sad at that moment, for mine had just died - a beautiful creature, my faith, and well in the flesh - but I loved her above all for her good manners. All she earned was for me; if she had only one ace, she gave me half. As I returned to the *villa*, I saw white objects moving among the tombs. I am dying of fear, especially because I had left a dead man in the city; I run to the country-house, and I find, as I pass over the threshold, what? A puddle of blood with a sponge dipped in it.

"And through the house I hear howls and tears; for the mistress was dead at nightfall. The servants tore their robes and snatch their hair. There was only one lamp, like a red dot, at the end of the room. The master left, I lit a large chest of fir, near the window; the flame was sparkling and smoky as the wind shook the gray vortices in the room; the light stooped and rose with a breath; the drops of resin oozed along the wood and crepitated.

"The dead woman was lying on the bed; she had a green face and a multitude of small wrinkles around her mouth and temples. We had tied a cloth around his cheeks to prevent his jaws from opening. The night butterflies shook their yellow wings in a circle near the torch; the flies were slowly moving along the top of the bed, and every puff of wind brought in dry leaves, which whirled. I watched at the foot, and I thought of all the stories, the mannequins of straw that one finds in the morning instead of the corpses, and the round holes that the witches come to make in the figures to suck blood.

"There was a strident, sour and tender sound among the hisses of the wind; one might have said that a little girl was singing to beg. The mode floated in the air and came in stronger with the breaths which scattered the hair of the dead woman; yet I was struck with amazement and did not move.

"The moon began to shine with a paler light; the shadows of furniture and amphora blended with the darkness of the ground. My eyes, which were wandering, fell upon the country, and I saw the sky and the earth glow with a gentle gleam, in which the distant bushes vanish, where the poplars no longer marked but long gray lines. It seemed to me that the wind subsided and the leaves did

not stir: I saw shadows slipping behind the hedge of the garden. Then my eyelids appeared to me leaden and closed; I felt very slight touches.

"Suddenly the chanting of the cock made me jump, and a frosty breath of the morning wind crumpled the peaks of the poplars. I was leaning against the wall; through the window I could see the sky of a lighter gray and a trail of white and pink on the eastern side. I rubbed my eyes - and when I looked at my mistress - that the gods assist me! - I saw that her body was covered with black bruises, patches of a dark blue, as big as an ace, - yes, like an ace - and dotted all over the skin. Then I screamed and ran to the bed; the face was a mask of wax under which I saw the flesh hideously eaten away; no more lips, no cheeks, no more eyes: the night birds had threaded them to their sharp beaks, like plums. And every blue spot was a funnel-shaped hole, in which glittered a plate of curdled blood; and there was no heart, no lungs, no viscera; for the breast and belly were stuffed with straw corks.

"The singing ghosts had carried away everything during my sleep. The man can not resist to the power of the witches. We are the toy of the destiny."

Our host is starting sobbing, his head on the table, between the silver skeleton and the empty cups. "Ah! Ah!" he cried, "I the rich man, I who can go to Baies by my property, I who publish a newspaper for my lands, with my troupe of actors, my dancers and my mimes, my flatware, my country houses and my metal mines, I am only a miserable body - and the ghosts will soon be able to find it." The child handed him a silver jar, and he rose.

However, the lamps were extinguished; the guests were agitated with a vague murmur; the silver pieces clashed, and the oil of an overturned lamp moistened the whole table. An entertainer came on tiptoe, his figure plastered, his forehead streaked with black lines; and we escaped through the open door, between a double hedge of newly purchased slaves whose feet were still white with chalk.

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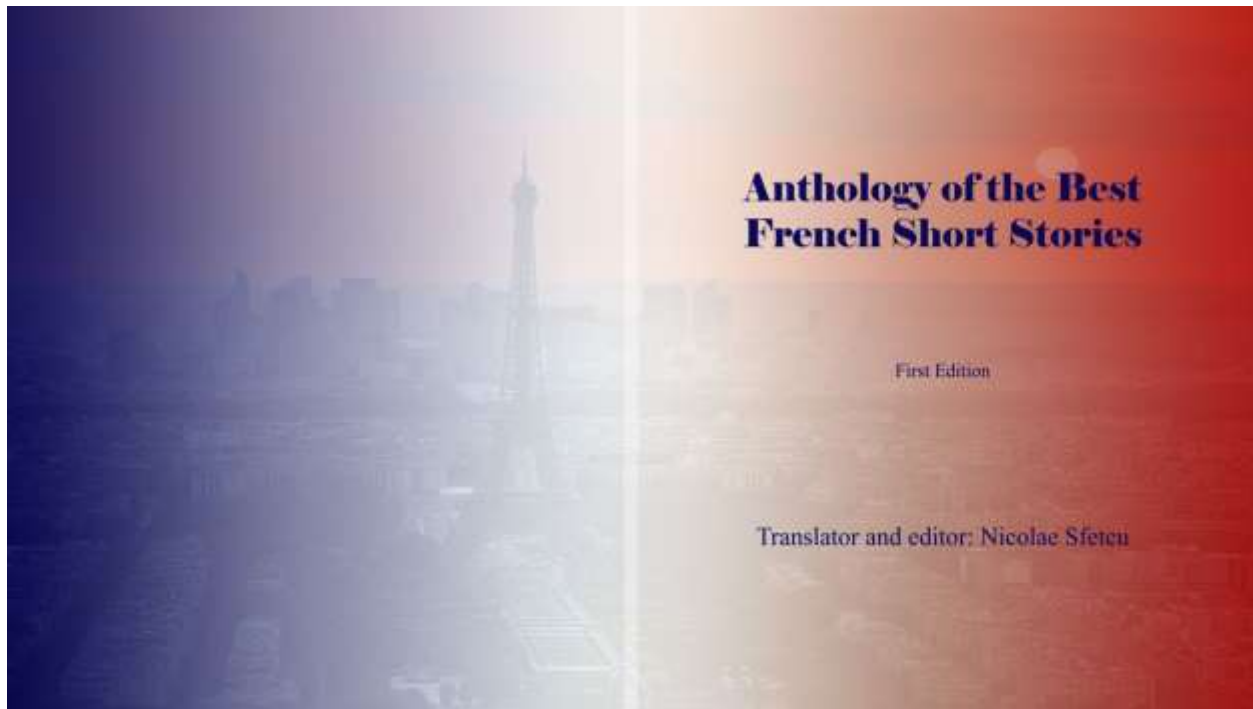
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Book



French Classical Authors

Translator and editor: Nicolae Sfetcu

Developed from oral storytelling tradition from the Middle Ages, short story was developed and diversified so that it is now difficult to characterize it. It cannot be included into a specific genre and substantially differ by country and historical period. Short story uses specific techniques to emphasize a singular effect or mood.

There are many funny definitions for short stories: "strong essences in small bottles", "to say much in a few words", "a way of synthesized thinking", "a quick way, appropriate to this century, to convey ideas", "intelligence on small spaces", etc. It is a very suitable genre for the youth of today, with concise and powerful message. An escape from the real world in a totally different universe for some, an opportunity to relax or a means of procrastination for others. Short stories readers have more powerful, concentrated and intense ideas and emotions. A deep and relaxing art, very appropriate for our time.

I brought together in this anthology some of the most beautiful short stories of the classical French literature. The first edition will be continued over many years to come, with other stories at least as beautiful, written by the most famous French authors.

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